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The Effects of Perceived Disability on the Helping Behavior of Strangers

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effects of perceived disability on the helping behavior of strangers. The investigators, one male and one female, appeared as either disabled or non-disabled, while unknowingly dropping their keys in front of a stranger. The investigators demonstrated three levels of need: no need/ no disability, in which the investigator did not appear in need or disabled; in need/ no disability, in which the investigator carried bags of groceries to appear "in need"; and disabled, in which the investigator used crutches and wore a leg cast. Eighteen randomly selected male and female participants were chosen based on convenience. The independent variable is the actual helping behavior, or whether or not the participant helps. The dependent variable is the perceived level of need. The results were not statistically significant; however, they showed the perceived disabled individual receiving more help than the non-disabled individual.

The US Census 2000 Supplementary Survey reports that over 40 million Americans have a disability. Of these 40 million, about 14 percent are between the ages of 21 and 64 years, and 10.5-13.9 percent of the 21-64 year olds are concentrated in South Dakota (Wellner, 2001). According to Gerschick (2000), disabled individuals comprise the second largest minority in the United States, just behind women. In addition, this population is likely to increase due to the aging of the baby-boom generation.

Despite the high numbers of disabled persons, there is still a stigma attached to handicapped individuals. According to Wolfe (1996), disabled individuals frequently experience intrusive questions and stereotypes. Gerschick (2000) describes three characteristics of stigmatization facing those with disabilities. The severity, visibility, and type of disability possessed mediate the extent to which a disabled person is stigmatized.

In regards to behavior toward members of stigmatized groups, Katz and Glass (1979) suggest that individuals often have feelings of sympathy or hostility toward stigmatized persons. Past research on helping behavior towards individuals with perceived disabilities is inconsistent; sometimes they experience more favorable treatment than non-disabled individuals, and other times they do not (Taylor, 1998). Levine, Norenzayan, and Philbrick (2001) found a consistent helping rate for seemingly disabled individuals in 23 large cities. Taylor (1998) also reported more physically-disabled persons being helped than non-disabled persons. Therefore, in the current study it is predicted that the public is more willing to assist individuals appearing to have a disability.

METHOD

Participants

The study contained 18 males and females from the Brookings community. Participants were selected based on convenience, but were randomly assigned to groups. No form of compensation was given, and all participants were treated in accordance with APA ethical standards. This project was approved by the SDSU Institutional Review Board.

Materials

To show perceived disability, the investigators used a set of crutches and a leg cast. To show perceived need, the investigators carried bags of groceries. Materials used also include a set of car keys and a flashy key chain.

Procedure

A male and female investigator played the role of both non-disabled and disabled individuals for each trial. The procedure consisted of three different levels of need as follows. Both investigators, on separate occasions, appeared non-disabled and unknowingly dropped their car keys in front of a stranger. They also dropped their keys while carrying grocery bags to appear "in need." They also dropped their keys carrying nothing in their hands and not appearing disabled. The male and female investigators repeated each prior procedure and did not drop their keys to control for extraneous variables.

The other two female investigators recorded data for each trial, one sitting in a nearby car, and the other seated nonchalantly outside of the stores. Data from the strangers consisted of body movements to indicate noticing the keys dropping, physically picking up the keys, verbal assistance, gender, and age. Groups of two or more individuals, children, elderly, and other disabled persons were excluded from participation. The trials took place in relatively secluded areas in parking lots of local businesses to increase the chances that the stranger hears and sees the keys dropping.

Results

The results did not yield statistical significance in a Chi-Square test between level of help and level of need, $\chi^2(2, N=18) = 4.00, p = .135$. As shown by Figure 1, there is a greater overall frequency of helping behavior for the perceived disability group than the no need/no disability and need/no disability groups. Participants in the perceived disability group helped in five out of the six trials. In the need/no disability group, participants helped in two out of the six trials. The same number of participants helped in the no need/no disability group. Data was combined for both the male and female investigator.



Figure 1. The frequency of helping behavior within three different levels of need.

Discussion

Contrary to the hypothesis, the number of perceived disabled individuals helped was not significant. The most substantial limitation was the very small sample size. Both investigators appeared disabled and dropped their keys only three times each, which is not enough times to produce a significant effect. In a similar study, Taylor (1998) produced statistically significant results using over 100 participants.

In the current study, there was no help for dropped keys, regardless of the level of need. One possible explanation for lack of helping behavior is the gender of the investigator. In a similar study, Long, Mueller, Wyers, and Khong (1996) reported that the female confederate was helped more than the male confederate. This suggests the possibility of a gender bias in helping behavior. However, in the present study, the investigators found the male investigator received more assistance.

Another explanation could be the demeanor of the participant. The disposition-situation interaction model proposes that a person's personality traits dictate their response to a certain situation. More specifically, in a situation with more than one possible response, a person is most likely to respond when the situation is important to them (Reynolds & Karraker, 2003). In relation to the present study, the participants may have assessed the situation of dropped keys as important or not important, and based their helping behaviors on those perceptions.

Cultural differences could have also affected the results. Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt (2002) reported differences in perception of social obligations between individualist and collectivist cultures. They found that Latinos had a stronger desire to engage in prosocial behaviors than Anglos. On the other hand, the results also showed that these groups did not differ in desire to help strangers. The location of the current study was limited in cultural diversity, with the participant population consisting only of Caucasian individuals.

A final alternative explanation is a measure of costs and rewards. The reward-cost model of helping behavior proposes that the probability of receiving help depends, in part, on the strength of the rewards and costs of providing help. In a non-emergency situation, helping was positively related to rewards rather than costs, suggesting individuals help to seek rewards (Kerber & Wren, 1982). In relation to the present study, participants may have sought reward in helping the investigators.

Although there was no statistical significance, the results did report a higher frequency of helping the disabled investigators. Lee & Murnighan (2001) propose an empathy-prospect model, which predicts that intentions for helping are stronger for individuals observing losses rather than gains. The participants who chose to help may have viewed dropping keys as a potential "loss" situation and decided to assist the investigator.

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AUTHOR NOTE

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